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Citation for published version:

Thumala Olave, MA 2018, 'Reading matters: Towards a cultural sociology of reading', *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 417–454. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-017-0034-x>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1057/s41290-017-0034-x](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-017-0034-x)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

American Journal of Cultural Sociology

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in American Journal of Cultural Sociology. The final authenticated version is available online at:
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057%2Fs41290-017-0034-x>

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Reading matters. Towards a cultural sociology of reading

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Abstract

Sociologists have studied reading mostly as a product of or an input to the social structure. In so doing they have failed to capture why reading matters to people. On the basis of the intensive practices of reading fiction among women in the UK this article begins to develop a cultural sociology of reading by showing how the pleasures of reading fiction support processes of self-understanding, self-care, and ethical reflection. A cultural sociology of reading is necessary because these readers' experiences of meaning-making disappear when reading is explained within the binaries escapism/confrontation, indoctrination/resistance, which frame much of the current research on reading. The discussion is based on the interpretive analysis of three bodies of data: 60 written responses by women to the UK's "popular anthropology" project, the Mass Observation Project (M-O), participation in two women's groups, and in-depth interviews with 13 women readers in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Keywords: reading, fiction, reflexivity, self, ethics, emotions

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I. Introduction

What are the uses and consequences of reading fiction among women? Why does their reading matter to them? The practice of reading fiction among women readers in the UK shows that reading is a pleasurable activity which enables self-understanding, ethical reflection, and self-care. Reading is “equipment for living” (Burke, 1998) that helps people make sense of themselves and the world around them as well as care for themselves. The effects of reading result from the act of reading itself and from the content of what is read.

Because fiction is the preferred genre among women the accounts by participants in this research tend to focus on novels and other forms of classic and contemporary fictional narrative. What these stories have in common and what makes the practice of reading them so attractive is that they produce experiences of intense self-loss or “enchantment.”

The kind of enchanted reading experiences and their subjective value, which the data reveal, cannot be accommodated within the existing conceptual apparatus used by the sociology of reading. A cultural sociology of reading is needed in order to capture what is going on when women read fiction in intensive ways and use their reading to orient and shape their lives.

The article makes two contributions. Empirically, it contributes to the understanding of the experiences of reading fiction and the impact they have upon the lives of intensive women readers and those who identify strongly with the label of “reader.” While it is known that women read more and read more fiction, the subjective

significance and existential impact of this reading has yet to be explored within sociology. Theoretically, the article begins to develop a cultural sociology of reading that brings meaning to the fore and is sensitive to the affective attachments, reflections, and valuations that occur when people engage with imaginative stories. A cultural sociology of reading is necessary because sociology has neglected meaning by studying reading mostly as a reflection of or an input to the social structure. The sociology of reading has operated mostly as a sociology *of* culture rather than as a cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith, 2003). Concerns with the links between literacy and social mobility or between tastes and social class—two main research lines pursued by sociologists of reading—preclude attentive explorations of the meanings and emotions attached to the subjective experiences of the reader. A cultural sociology of reading involves placing the experience and agency of readers at the center of the analysis. It also involves acknowledging that reading is situated and framed but not determined. Social actors, irrespective of their social position, can and do leave their situations when they read and because they read. Through the pleasures offered by fiction readers can both orient and care for themselves as well as relate to others. Reading fiction contributes to the search for the meaning of life and to making life liveable through the meanings encountered in texts and through the bodily practice of reading itself.

A cultural sociology of reading is located outside the binary oppositions between escapism and confrontation, indoctrination and resistance, part of the ideology critique influential both in sociology and cultural studies. Reading is certainly used to “escape” to alternative, fictional scenarios, as a means to relax and to have fun. However, it is also clear that enchantment does not entail escapism, understood as

alienation, false consciousness, or disempowerment. What the data shows is that reading and its pleasures help manage physical and emotional pain, understand the self and others, and engage with the world. Rather than an escape from life, reading fiction is a support to it.

Section II presents the scope of the research and describes the three sources of data used. Section III consists of a review of existing sociological research on reading that justifies the need for a cultural sociology of reading. Section IV, the core of the article, begins to develop a cultural sociology of reading. It offers conceptual propositions that emerge from and help to interpret the findings. This section offers first a schematic discussion of key findings from the combined analysis of the three data sets with illustrations from the data and then a close look at three cases of intensive readers. Section V offers concluding remarks.

II. The research

Research has shown that women read more and read more fiction (Griswold *et al*, 2005; Bennett *et al*, 2010; NEA, 2015; DCMS, 2016/17). Yet there is little sociological work about the subjective and existential meanings of the experience of reading. What is the impact of reading fiction intensively? Does reading for entertainment provide women readers with anything other than momentary pleasure?

Intensity refers to the number of books reported as read and the qualitative strength of the identification with the label of reader. The analysis is based on three data sources, summarized in Table 1, below. One is a set of in-depth interviews with 13 women readers conducted in Edinburgh during June and July of 2015 and January and

February of 2016. The interview participants were recruited through Meetup reading groups, Edinburgh City Council, and Edinburgh Central Library. A follow-up set of questions was sent via email to all interviewees, six of whom responded.

The second set of data was obtained from participation in three meetings with two women's groups during the same period as the interviews. Participation in the women's groups (which are not reading groups but who agreed to discuss books for the research) took place at a community center in Edinburgh.

To secure a variety of socio-economic backgrounds interview and group participants were screened and selected on the basis of a combination of residence—following the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation—education level, and employment.

[Table 1. Data sources by number and themes covered, about here]

The third set of data consists of 60 responses by women to Mass Observation (M-O) questions about reading and books (corresponding to the Spring of 1993 and the Winter of 2009). M-O is a project started in 1937 as a “people’s anthropology” of life in Great Britain (Calder and Sheridan, 1984). Volunteers, known as “M-O correspondents,” write in response to sets of questions called “directives”. The two directives chosen for analysis asked specifically about reading books and are part of the newer material collected by the project since 1981². The responses were collected

² For an analysis of the methodological issues in researching M-O material see Bloome *et al*, 1993. For a digital archive with responses to reading materials in Britain between

from The Keep, the Archive of the M-O project at the University of Sussex, England, where they were scanned for later conversion into text readable files for analysis.³

The M-O responses are valuable because they give access to rich descriptions of everyday life in the UK as seen by correspondents from a variety of backgrounds. The responses are rather brief (between one paragraph and one full page) and can be quite schematic. Written responses do not answer further questions nor do they give access to the body language and clues available to researchers in in-depth interviews, which would permit further exploration of the “emotional landscape” where reading is situated (Pugh, 2013).⁴ Nonetheless, the M-O material provides an excellent complement to the interview and group material when exploring the personal and social role of reading and books in Britain across a variety of social categories and geographical locations.

The numbers of books read by participants range between four and 26 over the past six months in the case of the groups and between two per month and over 100 a year in the M-O and interview data. Within fiction as the preferred genre, participants

1450 and 1945 see the Reading Experience Database, RED, managed by the Open University, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php>.

³ Interviews and group meetings were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. All material was coded and analyzed as one single data set using Nvivo. Questions and codes are available upon request.

⁴ Street (1984) and his collaborators carried out interviews with M-O respondents but the focus was on writing practices. See, for example, Bloome *et al*, 1997.

report reading, in particular, romance, historical romance, crime, horror, classical and contemporary literary fiction, fantasy, and science fiction. These imaginative stories are read for entertainment and pleasure as distinct from reading for work or education.

The category of fiction follows the readers' common understanding of it as an imaginative or "made up" story that follows certain conventions around plot, character presentation, narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end, and that for the most part does not relate "real" events. The categories of fiction/non-fiction, in turn, are usually based on commercial labelling of genres rather than on the distinctions and debates within literary theory. While the preferred and most discussed genre is fiction, enchantment can be produced by all kinds of stories, so the analysis does not exclude accounts by readers about the impact of other forms, such as memoirs, for example, although these are less prominent.

Some, but not all, of the intensive readers whose accounts are examined in this research can be seen as belonging to what Wendy Griswold has called "the reading class" (Griswold, 2000; Griswold *et al*, 2005). The reading class are that minority of people who read books for pleasure on a regular basis. In addition to being highly educated, the members of the reading class tend to be affluent, white, women, and urban. The notion of the reading class reflects the division between "reading as a matter-of-fact practice of just about everyone and the reading of literature, serious nonfiction, and the quality press as an esteemed, cultivated, supported practice of an educated elite" (Griswold *et al*, 2005: 139).

The data shows that reading matters beyond “the reading class,” among individuals with high and low levels of education and who read all sorts of books, not just serious literature. (Table 2, below, presents the characteristics of the readers). However, even if every reader fell into the category of the reading class the existing conceptual apparatus available for studying reading would fail to give a proper account of the impact of reading for them. The significance of reading for life is not dependent on tastes or levels of education or income and its impact is visible regardless of the social position of the reader. Reading can make any reader leave their situation, both literally and imaginatively. Why then focus on the social category of gender and on women in particular?

The focus on women’s reading practices in this article is justified for two principal reasons. The first, already noted, is the higher frequency of reading for leisure and reading fiction in particular among women. It makes sense to begin an exploration of why reading fiction matters by concentrating on the most avid consumers of the genre. The second reason is that women’s reading has historically taken place within a set of shifting normative constraints and regulations around piety, domesticity, community life, education, or sexuality, to name just a few (e.g. Pearson, 1999; Flint, 1993; Rose, 2001; Long, 2003). Women’s reading has been cast in ways that range from helpless vulnerability to frivolous escapism to sensual self-indulgence (Flint, 1993; 2006). These portrayals and the cultural codes that they mobilize make reading for pleasure arguably more problematic than for men. What women do with their reading, in the context of long lasting constraints within both their cultures and themselves about what is desirable and good, reveals much about their agency in contemporary British society.

[Table 2. Characteristics of the readers, about here]

III. The neglect of subjective experience and meaning-making in the sociology of reading

Sociology has paid little attention to why reading matters to people. In spite of the discipline's core concern with the dynamics of change in modern societies, in particular the shifts away from traditional social attachments, and the transformations in reflexivity, the practice of reading as a subjective meaning-making device remains underexamined. The existing sociological work on reading focuses primarily on the links between literacy and social context, on one hand, and between tastes and social class, on the other. As a shorthand, the first is labeled the "social practice approach" (following Griswold *et al*'s 2005 classification) and the second the "*Bourdieuian* approach."⁵

⁵ The classification of a variety of different studies into two broad categories inevitably glosses over important theoretical and methodological differences between them. These various works share a stance or a way of looking at the cultural practice of reading that justifies this categorization. Some of the works discussed are not by sociologists but by literary scholars interested in sociological questions. And while the *Bourdieuian* approach could be seen as a variant of the "social practice" approach it is considered separately because there is a group of studies that seek specifically to apply and expand Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus to the practice of reading.

A. The “social practice” approach to reading

As Griswold *et al* (2005) report, during the 1990s the emphasis in the study of reading shifted away from literacy, understood as a set of generic capacities linked to social development,⁶ towards reading understood as a set of locally situated and varied practices. The new concern was with the specific circumstances under which people read, once they have acquired the capacity to do so, and the kinds of problems that reading helps to solve.

One of the best known examples of the practice approach is Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) rich study of everyday literacy practices (reading and writing as well as numeracy) in Lancaster, England. Their ethnographic work stresses the wide diversity of uses of literacy in the various domains of people’s lives, including health, parenting, community organizing, budgeting, and paying bills. The comprehensive account of the uses of reading, of “what people do with literacy” (3) includes people making sense of themselves and the world through their reading, for example, of the press. However, these accounts are comparatively few and brief vis-à-vis the many other uses of reading, writing, and numeracy that must be highlighted in a complete study of one community. More importantly, the aim of this and other work on local literacies, such as that of Brian Street (1984; 1993), is to draw attention to the “vernacular” and “hidden” (as opposed to “dominant”) literacies, sharing their critical outlook and emancipatory purposes with cultural studies.

⁶ See Graff (1979) for the classic critique of this idea and a revised version in Graff (2010).

Against the perceived negative consequences of reading fiction, such as political disengagement or manipulation (inspired by Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the cultural industries), cultural studies emphasizes the various forms of resistance displayed in popular culture and among subcultures. In Radway's (1991) influential psychoanalytic interpretation of romance reading by women in the USA, romance reading is a response to the dissatisfactions generated by heterosexual marriage. When appropriating the representations of ideal romance offered in the texts, women are responding to the often unconscious frustrations imposed by the institution of marriage. Although Radway provides a sophisticated analysis of the motivations for and uses of reading, in the end she is careful to leave unanswered the question of agency. Does reading romance reproduce patriarchal power or does it allow for strength and independence? Acknowledging the multiple potential interpretations of texts by readers, Radway argues for the existence of regular patterns of meaning, which are determined by women's social and material situations. Also within a psychoanalytic approach, Felman (1993) offers a close reading of autobiographical texts by women and various texts by men to propose an alternative to Fetterley's stance of "the resisting reader" (1978), which seeks to exorcise the male mind from the woman reader's mind. Because this could lead to resisting reading altogether, Felman argues critics should instead uncover the resistance built into the texts themselves. Focusing on the agency of the reader rather than the texts, Megan Sweeny's study of the reading of women prisoners in the USA (Sweeny, 2010; 2012a; 2012b) shows that in the face of their confinement, personal histories of discrimination and poverty, and the restrictions on access to reading materials, these women, mostly African American and Hispanic, use books as templates to shape and

express their interiority and connect with the world outside prison. Sweeny's work emphasizes the struggles against race-based oppression in the criminal justice system. Also adopting a positive stance, Warhol has considered the somatic impact of reading sentimental novels (Warhol, 2003). Seeking to vindicate the "effeminate" feelings (such as crying) which are produced by the formal properties of these novels and found across genders, Warhol argues that the bodily reactions when reading encourage the reader to "rehearse and reinforce the feelings it invokes" (2003: 18). These feelings may then motivate action, although the argument that the encounter with the sentimental novel molds "bourgeois subjectivity" upon the reader's bodies, suggests more determination by the text than Warhol intends.

The analysis advanced here is different from that of cultural studies. While it is true that readers are mostly not gullible victims of manipulation and that agency is visible in their cultural consumption, the relationship people have with texts cannot be fully understood in terms of resistance either. Rather than "alert critical consumers" (Felski, 2008: 60) the readers in this research relate to their reading in affirmative ways that are closer to love than to critique. Rita Felski has called for literary studies to abandon the hermeneutics of suspicion⁷ and to take seriously the uses of reading for "solace and replenishment rather than something to be interrogated or indicted" (Felski, 2015: 151). Felski proposes that critics open up to the play drive, joy, hope, and inspiration found in the encounter with literature (Felski, 2015). In a similar

⁷ For an influential critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion in literary studies see Sedgwick (1997).

spirit, a cultural sociology of reading is located outside the binary domination/subversion. It faces the accounts of reading fiction by committed readers as meaningful in their own right rather than as indications of something else or as vehicles for protest.

B. The Bourdieusian approach to reading

The *Bourdieusian* approach does not capture why reading matters to people, because it aims to map literary tastes onto the social structure. Studies that follow Bourdieu have focused, for example, on linking cultural participation and social class. One such study by Kraaykamp and Dijkstra (1999) seeks to explain why members of the upper classes prefer serious literature while those of the lower classes prefer romantic fiction. The study finds that the social differences in book reading are due to differences in both the cultural competence and social status of the readers (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999). More recent work has included other variables—notably, gender—in order to refine and expand Bourdieu’s thesis but the aim is similar: to identify how class and gender, and the complex relationships between them, structure literary tastes (Bennett *et al*, 2010; Atkinson, 2016). Also seeking to advance Bourdieu’s approach, literary scholar Driscoll (2014) has studied middlebrow literature in literary festivals and book clubs and argues that it occupies a subordinate and feminized position in the literary field.

The focus on the structuration of taste and on issues of the legitimacy of cultural products means that research with this approach does not explore what readers do with texts once they have chosen them, why they care about them, or the outcomes of

reading for the self and its relationship with the world, beyond the affirmation of status or the accumulation of various forms of capital.

Neither the “social practice” approach nor the “*Bourdeusian*” approach is adequate for understanding why reading matters because they conceive of reading in terms of how much it allows for the reproduction of, or how much it participates in the critique of, existing social relations and structures. The significance of reading for life is better captured not as a dependent variable to be explained but from a cultural-sociological perspective, as “embedded in a horizon of affect and meaning” that both enables and constrains actors (Alexander and Smith, 2003: 12). This by no means involves denying the harmful consequences of gender, race, or class inequality. It does mean taking seriously readers’ subjective accounts of the meanings of their reading and what it does for them, even when these accounts are not critical or when they cannot be explained by reference to social position.

C. Reading in historical and institutional contexts

Within the sociological research on reading, Elizabeth Long’s work is one of the few that has explored the significance of reading for participants’ sense of self. Long’s (2003) rich historical account of women’s book clubs in the United States shows that discussing reading with others helps women confront and make sense of personal and social change. Long argues that, historically, groups have given women a series of tools for life, including: organizational skills; confidence in their ability to participate in rational discussion and in their cultural authority; knowledge to form opinions about the world; and a sense of solidarity. These skills and the discussions themselves

were conducive to women's involvement in programs for social reform in the United States (Long, 2003: 47).

While Long's study offers a sophisticated map of the contexts in which reading has been and continues to be shared among women in the USA, as well as the value that group participants place in their collective reading, it does not provide full accounts of how individual readers integrate reading into their lives beyond the group event. Most reading continues to happen outside reading clubs and only a fraction of it is shared. Moreover, as Long points out, "reading groups do not generally deal with the inmost reaches of subjectivity" (2003: 79) and, in fact, groups tend to avoid conversation veering into the inner lives of participants. This research builds on Long's insights about the ethical reflection and knowledge about the world enabled by reading. It focuses on reading as an individual practice that is as social as collective reading.

Another example of sociological research that has seriously considered the meaning of reading is that of Wendy Griswold. Griswold's study of the novel in Nigeria (2000) offers a comprehensive account of the reading infrastructure in the country, the "reading complex" formed by publishers, readers, and writers, as well as the content of the novels written by Nigerians and about Nigeria. Griswold shows that the novel in Nigeria has developed together with the nation and that the country's "reading class," who sustain a healthy market for national fiction, are committed to ideals of progress and modernization as much as to the pre- and postmodern features of the varied regional cultures.

The study's multilevel analysis of the "reading complex," however, does not focus on or give too much space to the experiential, emotional, or ethical dimensions of the reading of individuals. The comparatively brief discussion of the reception of the novels indicates that some committed readers value reading because of its capacity to allow for social mobility, to enhance social connections, and to offer knowledge about the times (Griswold, 2000: 116). The present research looks in more depth into these kinds of uses and valuations of reading for life. What happens when individuals use the resources that the reading infrastructure provides for them and do so intensively on a long-term basis? Does reading help readers lead their lives in a meaningful and liveable way? While Griswold is interested in the cultural object that is the Nigerian novel, the context of its production and reception, the present research is concerned with the subjective and existential contribution of both the practice of reading fiction and its contents—the reasons why readers care deeply about their reading. The following sections begin to develop a cultural sociology of reading that will answer these questions by focusing first on the role of pleasure as the facilitator of processes of self-understanding, ethical reflection, and self-care.

IV. Towards a cultural sociology of reading

A. The pleasures of enchantment

Why do people read? The strongest and most consistent response to this question is that it is fun. The main driver for reading fiction is pleasure; the memory, promise, and actualization of pleasure. Across the three data sets readers refer to their reading in terms of "enjoyment," "fun," "happiness," "relaxation," "comfort," "excitement," "adoration," "enthusiasm," and "love."

According to literary scholars the various kinds of narrative fiction, by way of their distinctive formal properties, are apt to induce specific emotional responses in their readers.⁸ The link between emotion and genre is such that “key passions determine genres or literary kinds”; elegy is about mourning, tragedy about fear and pity, the gothic novel about fear (Fisher, 2009: 14). Fictional narratives can induce “vehement emotions” (Fisher, 2009) and have purgatory, cathartic effects, as analyzed by Aristotle in *Poetics*. They can also produce less dramatic, non-cathartic, and less noble feelings. Modernist novels can produce irritation, envy, or boredom (Ngai, 2005). Sentimental novels can induce physical responses, such as crying (Warhol, 2003).

The emphasis of the present research is less on the links between form and response and more on the meaning of reading as a practice in the lives of respondents, even as they point to specific texts as particularly significant. The findings indicate that while fictional narratives generate a wide variety of emotions, some of them unpleasant, the overall evaluation of the experience of reading itself and the reactions it produces belong in a decidedly positive, affirmative category which incorporates a variety of emotional responses. As Warhol (2003: 30–31) has argued, following Oliver (1993),

⁸ Emotions have been distinguished from feelings (or affects) in that the first involve a subject and the second do not (Ngai, 2005: 25–28; Massumi, 2002; Clough and Halley, 2007). Emotions are the reflexive, linguistic expression of feelings, less motivated and less motivating to action (Warhol, 2003: 14). As in Ngai (2005) the terms “emotion” and “feeling” are used in the present research interchangeably and as a difference of degree rather than kind.

the “meta-emotion” of the experience of crying or of being moved by fiction, the readers’ attitudes towards the experience as a whole, are markedly positive. In some cases, these emotions and the state of bliss that they produce are sacralized by reference to religious imagery, as in the following remarks by mass observers. “Wouldn’t it be super if there is a library in heaven!” writes a retired teacher. Similarly, another mass observer writes “my idea of paradise is having mountains of books to read and the time to read them.” In secular contexts the expressions by these readers do not necessarily indicate religious commitments but are likely to spring from the historical association between reading and piety or even perhaps more generally between reading and erudition or wisdom (Hayes, 1996; Pearson, 1999; Long, 2003) and seek to convey the sacredness, the value of reading, for them by reference to available cultural codes.

That reading fiction is a pleasure is evident from some respondents’ confessions to feelings of guilt when they indulge in reading at times that are not usually marked out as leisure time. One mass observer in her mid-forties who works as a secretary writes that “reading novels for pleasure during the day still seems slightly sinful ... I love reading so much that I have to use it as a reward. It's something I can do when I've finished my mundane tasks e.g. doing the housework, or taking the dog for a walk!” This feeling is also present among some of those who are retired and are entitled to more of this kind of time. For example, one retired mass observer writes that she reads fiction in the evening, sometimes during the afternoon, but never in the mornings: “For some reason I have a strange inhibition about reading in the morning, except for the newspaper. I feel it is too self-indulgent and that the morning should be devoted to practical essentials, such as housework and shopping.”

The ambivalence expressed by these readers takes place in the context of improvements and setbacks in the amount and legitimacy of women's use of time for leisure as opposed to care or housework (England, 2010). At the same time, reading in general enjoys enormous prestige when compared with other cultural practices, such as television or gaming, for example, and it is aggressively promoted by all kinds of agencies (Griswold *et al*, 2005). Avid readers of fiction can rely on the codification of reading as supporting education and civic qualities. As one group participant put it, "as long as people read, it doesn't matter what they read." As the material discussed throughout the article will indicate, the positive cultural valuation of reading in general in British society manages to override the fact that women's reading for pleasure has been at different times and contexts polluted as dangerous, immoral, or banal.

Fiction in particular and, especially, romance and sentimental novels, have a reputation for escapism, which scholars have sought to tackle or remedy (e.g. Radway, 1991; Warhol, 2002). At least two issues are at stake here. One is the experience of being momentarily and imaginatively transported elsewhere during the act of reading. The other is whether continued engagement with the contents of fiction has the consequence of alienating, disempowering, or disabling the reader in their social lives. The argument here is that reading fiction does the first but not the second.

There is no question that reading fictional narratives is used to escape the present situation by entering into other worlds; readers enjoy being momentarily captured by stories. One interviewee describes the familiar experience in this way: "if I am really

into something it's like being immersed in a bubble. So anything could be happening, then something will pierce the bubble and I'll be like, 'what's been going on?' Anything could have been going on around me!"

As an aesthetic experience reading fiction produces enchantment, "the experience of total absorption in a text, of intense and enigmatic pleasure" (Felski, 2008: 54). This pleasure is derived from the illusion that results from the active and creative exercise of the imagination (Iser, 1972). In the dynamic coming together of the text and the reader's imagination that Iser calls virtual, the reader is called to group together the various components of the text to form a consistent whole. Illusion is produced "whenever consistent reading suggests itself" (Frye, 1967, in Iser, 1972: 288).

However, the experience of enchantment cannot be equated with escapism. Through the illusions of the aesthetic experience the reader becomes open to the unfamiliar "without being imprisoned in it" (Iser, 1972: 291). Fiction no doubt offers "the persistence of the mysterious, wondrous, and perplexing in a rationalized and at least partly secularized world" (Felski, 2008: 75). But the encounter with imaginative texts does not disable the readers. On the contrary, it enables active meaning-making, which allows for self-understanding and ethical reflection as well as being a key device for the care of the body. The following section discusses how enchantment supports the first of these processes, self-understanding.

B. Self-understanding

Rather than being "ignorant and mute," pleasure has the power to open a space of meaning and understanding (Jauss in Ricoeur, 1990: 174). Jauss (1982) argued that

the aesthetic and the cognitive work together, that pleasure is tied with new understandings of the world as “aesthetic perception also always already includes understanding” (Jauss, 1982: 142). The literary text does not offer empty self-enjoyment but a self-enjoyment that is mediated by the knowledge of what is other. This is the case even when the fictional text does not fall into the category of literature as per academic standards.

When speaking about why they read, respondents frequently link pleasure with understanding. For one interviewee, an administrator in a university who prefers nineteenth-century and contemporary novels, “a large part of it is understanding myself better ... I’ve always felt it’s quite a struggle sometimes to relate to the world and reading novels actually helps me to understand the world better, through many different viewpoints ... the worlds that people develop for themselves, that’s what interests me, that is what I enjoy.”

The claim that reading helps self-understanding does not imply that the self is easily accessible or transparent. It is instead a difficult, indirect process that can fail. Jorge Semprun, for instance, has described the limits to the narratability of the horrors of his experience at Buchenwald (1997: 159). Some parts of the self and some experiences may not be communicable.

Nonetheless, when reading fiction, readers are constantly faced with moments of “recognition” (Felski, 2008). Recognition means that in the interplay of interiority and exteriority the novel or the story inspires a revised or altered sense of self by turning diffuse sensations into newly visible, distinct shapes (Felski, 2008: 25). This process

has been theorized from multiple perspectives, in literary theory and philosophy. One key insight is that the text articulates what the reader feels or knows but has not yet expressed. One interviewee explains how “The *Narnia* series and *The Last Temptation* didn't so much change how I feel and think about religion [as an agnostic] but explained them so much more articulately than I ever could.” Reading serves self-understanding by offering the possibility to formulate the unformulated, “that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness” (Iser, 1972: 299). Or, as Ricoeur (1973) explains by reference to Proust in *Time Regained*, fiction offers “a sort of magnifying glass” for the person to form or “refigure” themselves through the words that they read in themselves. Self-knowledge or “refiguration by narrative” (Ricoeur, 1973: 80) happens indirectly, through the mediation of signs.

That self-understanding is not an automatic, direct process is clear in the account of another interviewee, a Chinese woman who moved to Britain a few years ago and whose reading habits have shifted after her divorce from reading romance almost exclusively to the search for self-improvement through fiction and non-fiction books. She explains that

There are some more immediate questions you have in your head and then maybe you look for a more direct answer, or even the travel books, if you go to travel. But there are also some questions I think a lot of people, for me anyway, maybe a little bit more existential or a bit more profound, you don't think okay I need to go to look for an answer today or tomorrow or next week, but it's just there. So whenever you come across a book, if it fits into your

question, you continue. It might not answer completely or open the door but it might just trigger something or start a next level of thinking and stuff.

Recognition is not guaranteed and self-understanding remains a project that reading stimulates. In this, as in other responses, there is a commitment to the richness of the world of texts, to the ability, as Manguel would say, of “the words on the page to give the world coherence” (2010: ix). Importantly, the self-understanding that readers can seek to achieve through their reading is inseparable from reflections about the good life—of how the person ought to live, including their relationships with others. The following section discusses how these are linked in readers’ valuations of their reading.

C. Ethical reflection and social bonds

Fiction has ethical impact in two respects. The first is that it presents models of the good life, variously defined. The second, related, sense is that it offers readers occasions to reflect upon their position and commitments towards others and oftentimes alter or support their relations with them.

According to Nussbaum (1990), certain—selected realist nineteenth-century—novels can cultivate the ethical imagination, the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person and see ourselves as other. These novels can also promote empathy by developing imaginative abilities in the reader—in particular, the ability to understand how others’ similar wishes and hopes develop differently in different social circumstances (Nussbaum, 1995).

When considering how to lead their lives, some readers refer to fiction to examine, for example, the types of relationships they value. One interviewee explains that in books such as *Pride and Prejudice* (“one of the first books that I truly loved and still love”), or *Wuthering Heights*, whose characters she rejected, she encountered models of relationships she approves of and those she wishes to avoid. “One of the many things that I love about it [*Pride and Prejudice*] is the way in which Elizabeth learns and becomes more aware of who the people she knows are ... and how that affects her relationship with them, some for the better, some for the worse.” In turn, “*Wuthering Heights* made me think that I would never want to have a relationship with someone similar to the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliffe.” And the reading of “trashy romance novels and bodice rippers when I was a teenager (some Danielle Steele and a lot of Nora Roberts)” made her “more cynical about love and romance than desiring of it.” While arguably the classics offer this reader a more powerful or sophisticated set of models for how to lead a life, she can also shape and reveal herself and the kinds of relationships she favors through “trashy romances.” Through the stories and characters that she loves and hates, this reader comes to know what she values and who she is. Of course these valuations take place in the context of other sources which are equally important to the person. In this respect, Booth (1988) has argued that the relationship with fictional characters and their situations, the fictional stories’ implied judgments about how to live, shape the character of the reader inasmuch as they impact upon their commitments. In a dialogical process he calls “coduction,” over time the reader produces and revises ethical judgements from the combination of principles, lived experience, and advice from friends (both literary and “real”). A similar kind of synthesis emerges in the discussion by one interviewee

about whether she can identify the influence of books in her character or behavior: “it's a little difficult to separate and identify where the influences on my behavior have come from. It is a mixture of reading, obviously, friends, family, work, education, travel, etc., all mixed and merged together.”⁹ Nonetheless, she does offer some illustrations in the passage below:

I read a lot of the Babysitter's Club books when I was young and distinctly remember attempting to write poetry and spreading screwed up balls of paper with my bad attempts over my bed in the same way that the character Malory is described as doing. I hid in my wardrobe desperate to discover Narnia and I hoped to find Diagon Alley every time I visited London. I have on more than one occasion attempted to keep a diary as a character I liked in various books kept them. More often now that I am supposed to be an adult, I attempt to be more serene because of characters that I have felt to be that as well as elegant and refined (several Jane Austen characters come to mind and Jane Eyre). I actively try to avoid behaving in particular ways, to be less angry, spiteful, cruel or judgmental and use reading as a way to educate myself about other people.

The success of this reader in shaping her character through her reading is less significant here than the reflections prompted by her reading about how she wishes to

⁹ This and the next quote from this participant are written responses to a follow up question sent over email.

conduct herself with others. It is the opportunity to understand herself and others better and to shape herself that make reading valuable to her.

Fiction helps these readers develop a better sense of what they care for and who they are because it prompts emotional responses. From a position quite distinct from that of Nussbaum's and Booth's humanist liberalism, Ahmed has argued that "objects that give us pleasure take up residence within our bodily horizon. We come to have our likes which might even establish *what we are like* (emphasis in the original)" (Ahmed, 2010: 32). Rather than a distraction or a source of distortion emotions are a central component of reasoning and an indication of what and who individuals care for. The response of one female mass observer, a voice-over artist, to the task of comparing fiction to other kinds of writing, such as government reports, is explicit about the emotional and ethical force of fiction. She writes:

Garnethil Trilogy — although, on the face of it, full of wildly dysfunctional and underprivileged characters — has such a ring of truth and passion about it that I was absolutely gripped. I doubt that any other medium could convey in quite such depth and vividness what she's managed to say about drug-addiction, poverty, alcoholism, joblessness, and deprivation in modern-day Glasgow. I haven't read many government reports in full, but any extracts I've seen strike me as unemotional, full of cold facts, and lacking in any descriptive powers—and, therefore, real engagement.

Some texts, like the *Garnethil Trilogy* referred to above, require readers to respond to things that may be difficult to confront and they make this process palatable by giving

them “pleasure in the very act of confrontation” (Nussbaum, 1995: 6). Exposure to the situation of others may stop short of producing a change in behavior. In other cases, it prompts action. For example, one interviewee describes the impact of feminist literature, such as *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French, upon her reading habits. This literature made her angry at the state of gender relations and she has since abandoned “chick lit.” These readings have also increased her awareness of “misogyny and sexual inequality” and her ability to “challenge it more when I see it, and am much more aware of how it shapes the world.” As a consequence of this change, she “joined the Women's Equality Party last year and I'll be voting for them in the Scottish Parliament elections this year.”

Another way of looking at how fiction contributes to ethical reflection is to consider that it operates as emotional reflexivity. Emotional reflexivity is the practice of deliberating and making decisions based on ones' own and others' feelings as much as on other forms of knowledge (Holmes, 2010; Burkitt, 2012). Such reflections are “infused with feelings about how it fits (or does not) with others and what they think, feel and do” (Holmes, 2010: 148). Reading is used by some participants to monitor personal emotions and to reflect upon them.

One interviewee in her late twenties describes how she uses the app Evernote. “Whenever I've finished a book I will write the title and the author and when I've read it and where I've read it, and a small synopsis maybe ... but then more how it made me feel. I'll just go through it and it reminds me of my emotional world at that time.” Certain books have shifted her views about, for example, the consequences of war. In particular, “*Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje; *The Garden of Evening Mists*

by Tan Twan Eng and the book I am currently reading, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan.” These have generated in her “shifts [in] my awareness of historical events, the past, and how this shapes the current world situation.” As a result, she sees herself differently, as more appreciate of living in a peaceful society. She goes further to argue that this “in turn affects my behavior towards others. I try to be more patient with my partner when he does things that I would do differently. I try and live in the moment, i.e. when I meet a friend for coffee, the mobile phone stays in the bag. It also extends to me giving more money to charity and being more interested in, seeking out more information about current political events.”

For this participant, reading matters as a source of knowledge about the shifts in her emotional life and her behavior towards others, and as a motivation for self-improvement, however small the gestures she makes may be. This emotional reflexivity complements the notion of aesthetic reflexivity, the process of self-interpretation that is mediated by the arts (Lash, 1993; DeNora, 2000). The process of self-interpretation and self-shaping enabled by reading fiction is not only cognitive but affective too and therein lies its force.

While the previous quote illustrates how the content of fiction books is used to reflect upon shifts in the self and its relation to others, the following example shows a further way in which books are used ethically. Fiction reading is often used as a prop that facilitates social interaction and connection.

One psychology student who is a fan of vampire stories and fantasy values one series in particular: “*Twilight* saved the relationship with my mother. We didn’t really talk

because I am difficult and my mother is particular as well. So when *Twilight* came out and she said, ‘You should read this, you’d like this,’ so I read it and then we had something to talk about... and then we started hanging out together.”

Several responses to the importance of reading include the easing of social or intimate relationships, a connection that runs counter to the image and “ideology of the solitary reader” (Long, 2003), a withdrawn, less involved, or directly asocial individual. The interactions prompted by reading are located in a continuum between solitary reading and various forms of formal and informal sharing. These connections with others that matter, which are facilitated by reading fiction, can be seen as having therapeutic effects. The following section explores these uses including the directly somatic impacts of reading for wellbeing.

D. Self-care

The enchantment of fiction and the pleasures of stories offer opportunities for self-care. Readers use reading to induce affective states and this in turn allows them to process ideas and emotions in ways that can be therapeutic.

An American marketing executive describes herself in the interview as “a comfort reader” who uses reading as an “outlet.” She reads constantly but especially intensively when going through change, such as when she moved to the UK in her first experience of living abroad. She explains: “If I’m going through a difficult time or a transition, which is usually a difficult time, I’ll oftentimes think during the day, ‘I’ve got this book I’m going to read before bed’ and that’s a really reassuring thing.” When she became a mother for the first time, she used the reading of her favorite

fiction books to care for herself while developing her relationship with her child. She recalls that:

When Chris, my son, was just born that was so full on ... I was getting no sleep, I was exhausted all the time [...] and it wasn't until I realized [...] that I could sit back in bed and I could prop him on my chest and read. Once I realized that I could do that I felt like, "I can get through this [...] this isn't so bad."

Psychologists have found that readers consciously seek to use their reading of fiction to change or maintain emotional states (Mar *et al*, 2011; Miall and Kuiken, 2002). Respondents often say that they use reading to relax or calm down. One interviewee thinks that reading her favorite vampire stories "lowers my blood pressure like nothing else." Yet, it is difficult to predict the outcome of the encounter with the text, even in the cases of formulaic works or texts such as sentimental novels with narrative structures that are devised to generate specific affective responses, such as crying (Warhol, 2003). While these responses are likely for some forms they are not guaranteed and readers know this. For some readers, like the woman cited above, returning to her favorite fiction books, a series that takes place in a small American town, is comforting because familiar, although her responses to the text are not always identical and depend on "what is going on my life at the moment." At other times, and for other readers, the appeal of fiction lies in the possibility of the unexpected. One interviewee who enjoys crime fiction prefers the books in the genre that are less formulaic, or as she puts it less "samey": "sometimes actually in some ways it's more satisfying when a situation isn't properly resolved because sometimes,

depending on what the story is, that's actually more true to life, that things aren't all neatly tidied up." For these readers, reading fiction is attractive inasmuch as it involves a combination of control and indeterminacy.

Another way in which reading is used for self-care is as a quotidian presence or companionship. Participants across the three data sets speak or write about the solace and joy of reading at the end of their working day, during their commute, when on a queue or alone in a cafe. The book in these occasions is associated with rest and the domestic or with personal space. For example, one group participant says she often looks forward during the day "to going back home to my novel." The act of "always carry[ing] a book with me" or the confession that "I am miserable without a book" suggest how significant the physical presence of engaging stories is for these readers' wellbeing. These accounts of companionship are a step removed from Booth's (1988) more dialogical and substantive notion of literary narratives' moral lessons which influence, in his view, the reader's character through the interaction with plots and characters in the story. While these kinds of reflections emerge when readers discuss significant texts, the material presence of books during the day is in itself a support.

Once again it is important to note that the search for relaxation and the comfort of companionship that is observed in the data cannot be fully understood as "escapism." The following account by one interviewee who is a scientist illustrates this well. She explains why she reads in the following terms:

I guess it's that I find my life quite stressful and lots of different demands, emotional demands, daily demands like work demands and stuff. And to read

is to escape into a completely different world and not having any responsibility of making decisions and what's going to happen, it's there already.

What is going on in this account is not escapism understood as the desire to flee or deny. As Aubry (2011) has discussed, citing Holland's (1968) ideas about literature's therapeutic functions, fiction presents readers with the chance to experience a wide range of emotions without having to face the consequences of the actions in the story. The lack of responsibility, however, rather than escape, can lead to "confrontation with the deeper, more basic realities of the inner self" (Aubry, 2011: 30). The same reader goes on to discuss the kinds of books she likes to read in order to relax and it is clear that her "escape" is motivated by the intention to "return" a more informed, aware person:

I definitely don't avoid sad stories. In fact, I don't seek them out but there have been a couple of books recently that I've read, Africans coming to Europe or to America and how they're experiencing that transition, which really helps me because I lived in Tanzania and I had that transition the other way ... Also I've got two PhD students who are Tanzanian and who regularly come to Europe to study. That helps me understand parts of what they might be going through or things that I've gone through. It reminds me of other countries, not Tanzania but Sierra Leone or whatever, what's actually happening in the real world and for me that's really important to remember.

The reader quoted above reads to relax, to look after herself; but this is only possible, the process is only enjoyable and meaningful, insofar as the reading engages her concern for others. Aubry (2011) has sought to qualify the view of contemporary “middlebrow” women’s fiction in the USA as a privatized genre, which neutralizes all civic and political engagement. In his view, the psychological, therapeutic concerns and vocabulary deployed by works in this genre activate social and political meanings among the American middle class. In the UK, the readers similarly value the sense of relatedness afforded by fiction. As Aubry (2011: 86) argues, in the absence of a shared history or culture readers who yearn for empathy and cross-cultural similarity find through fiction’s affective work a sense of shared humanity.

Of course, not all readers read in the same way and the degree to which they search for relatedness varies. For those who are less inclined to seek out or justify their reading by reference to self-knowledge or ethical impact, the enchantment of fiction has value mainly as a source of bodily care and release. For example, one interviewee who works in media marketing and has two small children describes herself as “unsentimental” about books. She discards books as soon as she reads them and has now switched to an e-reader for ease of access to new texts and the reduction in “clutter.” She reads “just because I like it, it relaxes me.” In the case of this reader, most of her fiction reading matters as a treat that helps her to recover from work and care duties. Although there are novels, such as Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) narrated from the point of view of the mother of a young man involved in a school massacre, that have made a strong impact on the way she considers her own children, she does not actively seek reading for the purposes of self-understanding or ethical reflection.

What has been said so far about the three processes that reading fiction enables—namely self-understanding, ethical reflection, and self-care—can be understood as a set of devices or “equipment for living” (Burke, 1998). Burke argues that literature is “equipment for living” because it enables the naming of situations, the singling out of patterns of experience, and the development of strategies for handling them (Burke, 1998: 595–596). The strategic naming of situations that novels such as *Madame Bovary*, for example, provide, single out and name patterns of experience that are generalized and sometimes timeless. These devices allow the reader to “size things up” for the purposes of planning and forecasting in their own lives (Burke, 1998). What the examples presented will have shown is that the formalization of others’ experiences into stories can orient reflection and behavior. To this capacity of fiction to orient readers in a cognitive and normative way this analysis has added an affective dimension which is inseparable from the others. The pleasures of reading and the emotions it provokes facilitate self-understanding and ethical reflection while at the same time providing somatic, bodily support. Different readers will value and seek out one or a combination of these at different moments in their lives.

E. Zooming in: three cases of intensive readers

The discussion in the previous sections of the main ways in which reading contributes to readers’ lives and why it matters to them has been organized around the thematic analysis of the combined data sets obtained from group discussions, interviews, and archive material. This section zooms into the stories of three readers. The purpose is to complement the decontextualized presentation of themes, and to avoid, as much as

possible, an alienated description, characteristic of many social scientific accounts of social life, where the person is absent in the midst of conceptual elaborations (Douglas and Ney, 1998). As Flint has argued, given the varieties in the patterns of reading among women it is impossible to produce a homogenous picture of the increasingly evanescent, “woman reader” (Flint, 1993). Individual examples should be considered (Flint, 2006). The cases presented below offer three different accounts of how reading matters in the context of a more complete picture of the person. The cases illustrate, with different emphases, the practical and embodied integration in the lives of readers of the analytical categories of self-understanding, self-care, and ethical reflection, an integration that is not visible in the thematic analysis offered so far. The cases were selected because they cover a variety of social backgrounds, because they are the richest thematically (they touch in different ways on all of the themes occurring in the findings), and because they display vividly the emotional force of the concerns and valuations of reading and books deployed by participants across the data sets.

1. *Margaret*¹⁰

Margaret’s story shows, first, how fiction supports the construction of a meaningful biographical narrative. Motifs that occur in fairy tales, novels, and memoirs contribute to make sense of a past of child abuse and the loss of a parent and inform present decisions. Second, the act of reading itself has therapeutic value as it provides relief from cancer pain and the routines of care. Margaret has built a sense of self as a

¹⁰ Real names have been changed as well as details that may help identify the participants.

survivor that is inspired by the content of her reading and that in turn shapes her reading preferences.

Margaret grew up in Gorgie, Edinburgh, during the 1960s. The daughter of a baker who had fought in WWII, she interrupted her education at 13 to look after her mother and siblings, two years after her father's death. Her mother abused her and their relationship remained conflictual until her death a few years ago. Margaret later resumed her education, did two years of nursing school and got married. She worked for a few years as a care assistant in a nursing home and then stopped in order to look after her family in what she calls an "old school" arrangement whereby "the man goes out to work to provide, the woman stays at home and looks after the house and the children." Her husband is a construction worker and they have two children aged 21 and 28 and one grandchild.

Margaret spoke of literacy and numeracy as ways to get a "decent job" and "control your money," but for her books are more than instruments for social mobility and acceptability. "Reading is the most important part of my life", she says vehemently. Her reading has been motivated by her father's interest in it as a way of understanding the world and getting ahead in life—a view of reading that is consistent with historical and contemporary accounts of the intellectual life of the British working class (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Rose, 2001). In order to honor the memory of her father and try to grasp what he might have experienced during the war as well as to distance herself from her abusive mother, who was not a reader, she reads novels that are set during the two great wars. She also reads other historical fiction titles, historical romance in particular. At the time of the first interview for the research she

had just finished *In The Bleak Midwinter* (2011) by Carol Rivers. She also likes to read stories about children and animals, who are exposed to danger, abuse, or injustice. In one such story children are abused in a religious institution. In her words “they were supposed to be people of God and how they could whip their children and abuse their children, and even starve their children. In my eyes, they're no type of person at all, they shouldn't even be on this earth.” Although books that describe the misfortunes of the vulnerable make her angry they are amongst her favorites: “even though there is all this stuff going on which I class as evil, you still can't put it down.” She continues to read them “because you want to see what happens to the kids. You've got to get to the end to see if the kids have survived.”

These kinds of stories are appealing to Margaret because of their ethical power. They allow her to engage with others' misfortune and to reflect upon her own position in relation to them. The text prompts her to “imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one's loved ones” (Nussbaum, 1995: 5). That reflection is done within and drawing upon specific cultural frameworks and resources. The themes of abuse in particular and bad fortune in general feature prominently in Margaret's account of episodes in her own life as an abused child who had to fight her way to a more rewarding life. Some of these accounts contain classic themes, such as those found in the *Mother Goose* fairy tales, perhaps especially *Cinderella*. While Margaret does not mention the tale as part of her present reading, its conventional motifs of parental neglect, malnutrition, and jealousy, present in the classic fairy tales analyzed by Darnton (1985) and Bettelheim (1976), can be considered as part of her cultural repertoire, of deep structures of meaning (Alexander and Smith, 2003), and as likely to have informed the shape of

her account if not its content. In the following excerpt from the interview, Margaret describes her situation in the family after her father's death: the motifs of neglect and jealousy emerge clearly. Margaret inherited the family flat in Gorgie and in the process discovered that her siblings—who did not get a share of the property—were not her father's children. She also found out that her mother had been having relationships with other men and admitted to marrying her father “for his wages.” The conflict over the inheritance accentuated already existing preferences and mistreatment, including her full responsibility for the housework and emotional mistreatment.

I wasn't classed as part of the family. My sister and my two brothers were. I wasn't allowed to sit at the same table as them. Christmas came, they'd get all the presents. I'd get—I always remember—an apple, a satsuma and a 50 pence piece. Christmas dinner, I have to serve them all and I wasn't allowed to sit with them to have my dinner. I had to go and sit away in the corner.

If we consider Margaret's personal Christmas story alongside her account of the abused children in the novel she recalls above we can begin to see how the interaction with texts can produce “recognition” (Felski, 2008). Initially inarticulate feelings of pain and a sense of injustice can become better known when lived experience interacts with textual accounts. The text provides Margaret a language and imagery with which to give shape to her experiences. Recognition through reading is not repetition but “the joy of knowing more than is already familiar” (Gadamer, 2003 in Felski, 2008). Through her reading Margaret can “refigure” herself (Ricoeur, 1973), formulate herself to herself and to others, such as the interviewer who is listening to

her story. In a way similar to the incarcerated women studied by Sweeny (2012a and b) in the USA, who use urban books as templates or canvases that they can fill in with their own “psychological interiority,” Margaret describes how she can find and build her own story in the reading of novels that contain these themes and in memoirs of abuse.

There are two or three books that I’ve read that I’m not the only one that the mother didn’t want, that the mother abused and the mother battered. There are a lot of kids that’s happened to and to read their story to the end to find out how it’s went, it’s just the same as me.

One of these books, which has had a particular impact, is David Pelzer’s (1995) *A Child Called It*. In a series of three volumes Pelzer describes the story of his abuse by his alcoholic mother. Margaret sees several parallels between her own experiences and what she remembers of Pelzer’s accounts: the ban on eating with the family, the obligation to do household chores, the way they have raised their own children. At one point during the interview Margaret describes how her mother tried to strangle her eldest son: “she had my son by the throat and his wee lips were going blue. And I hit her ... in the whole 36 years, I never lifted my hand but as soon as she hurt my child, that was a different story. Hurt me, not my children.” She then recalls finding this same sequence of events and reactions in the last volume of Pelzer’s memoirs. “The last one, he was married with children of his own, and what was weird, he said what I would have said—‘you can hurt me all you want because it doesn’t matter but never hurt my children.’” Margaret describes her moral stance towards education and family life as emerging partly from her interaction with texts like this. The tropes and

valuations in the memoirs have become part of Margaret's own, and inform processes of emotional reflexivity and ethical reflection that shape her behavior as a parent. Her emotional reactions to the text by Pelzer—anger, fear, relief—help her give shape to her ethical commitments and inform her decisions regarding, for example, how to demonstrate affection by, among other things, providing her children with coveted consumer goods.

He did the exact same things, he spoilt them rotten, she's got everything she wants [Margaret's daughter is in the room during this part of the interview.

Addressing her daughter:] 'Oh yes you have, you've got your iPad, you've got your iPod, you've got your smart TV in your bedroom, you've got internet in your bedroom.' What do you get somebody for their Christmas or their birthday that's got everything? I want my kids and my grandchildren to have what I never had as a child. From the age of 11 right up to 16, I started working, I never had a Christmas. Never had a toy.

So far the argument has been that Margaret's reading is central in the production of a meaningful biographical account that includes concern for fictional and actual vulnerable others and for her own self as an abused child. Her reading has provided her with models of life (including what it means to survive abuse and how best to raise her children). It has also provided her with a language that has helped her give shape to and validate the importance she gives to offering her children a loving, safe, and well provided for life. The reflexivity displayed here and in the other two cases that follow is consistent with Long's research, where participants in reading groups identified with or felt close to fictional characters who "become a prism for the

interrogation of self, other selves, and society beyond the text” (Long, 2003: 153).

Long also finds that the identification with characters that allows for self-interrogation and exploration of the meaning of one’s life has “quasi-therapeutic effects.” In Margaret’s case reading supports a positive sense of self as a survivor and has a direct impact on her quality of life in the present. Margaret has had cancer three times and is currently in remission after a mastectomy. When asked why she reads, she explains:

It relaxes me. I go in a wee world of my own when I'm reading, because every day, 24/7 I'm in pain. But when I lie upstairs and I've got the window open and I've got my wee lamp on, I pick up my book and I start reading. It's going to sound silly to you but I forget about the pain and I get into the story. Helps me deal with the pain.

This form of enchantment produced by reading is directly beneficial to Margaret’s physical and mental wellbeing. Although she has access to medication for the cancer pain, it is not always effective and reading has a therapeutic effect because it distracts her. The feelings triggered by her reading, such as pain, pleasure, sadness, and joy work to enchant her and at the same time give her a sense of control: “I’ve got morphine as well. Rubbish. It’s no use sitting and crying about it, you just get up and get on with it. There are still things to do, you've still got the housework to do, you've still got the washing to do. Between that is my reading.”

Margaret’s use of reading as an aid in the conducting of her everyday life is representative of the findings of this and other studies where women describe reading’s value by reference to the deliberate carving out of personal time to combat

or ameliorate obligations of work or care (Radway, 1991 Long, 2003). Margaret's use of books for the organization of her schedule and the management of her bodily sensations as well as her self-descriptions as a survivor and a fighter show a considerable degree of agency in the context of the restrictions posed by gender norms, family obligations, and illness. Seeing her intensive reading and its significance to her as the result of frustration with her "old school" marriage and unmet needs, (Radway 1991) would miss the positive, creative practice of self-care and meaning-making she engages in on a daily basis.

2. *Alison*

Alison's case points to two key ideas. One is that fiction allows for ethical reflection in a safe imagined space that can then inform action. The second is that reading acts as a bridge for social relations.

Alison describes herself as a "keen reader" who cannot imagine a house without books. During the interview, she frequently expressed great excitement and happiness about the chance to speak about her favorite or latest reads. At one point she clapped with childlike enthusiasm and on various occasions she cheered at the questions, so stimulating and important were they for her. Although Alison reads constantly her practice increases in times of distress, what she calls her "Oh-God-I-can't-face-life" moments when she will read just under 30 books per month. In more normal periods she reads about ten books per month. Her intensive reading offers her "an escape from dealing with the everyday." A designer from Scotland, she stopped working ten years ago because of depression. During the interview she also mentions having dyslexia, which she says narrows the range of books that she can read to "young adult, supernatural romance and regency romance, crime thrillers, and historical fiction" and

occasionally more challenging novels that are “reflective” and that “bring up a lot of emotions.” At the time of the interview she was reading *Frances and Bernard* by Carlene Bauer (2013) and finding it distressing. She intersperses these more difficult reads with easier ones to “tone down the tension” provoked by the novels. The interview takes place right after she has been through a period of relative isolation that lasted about a month. During that period she read 26 books. Reading helps Alison “when tense, to calm down. Having easy things to read that make me laugh. Last week I tackled things I was putting off, paying bills, debts. Found clear air, breathing space mentally.”

Instead of fomenting passivity or alienation, books provide Alison with a mostly pleasurable pause from the challenges of everyday life as well as a stimulus to engage with it. Reading gives her, as she says, “the opportunity in a safe environment” to engage vicariously with difficult topics or situations. In and through fiction Alison is better able to confront intense, emotive events, and confront the realities of her inner self (Aubry, 2011: 29), including her ethical commitments. For example, she describes the plot of a novel in which a senior man moves to Norway to live with his pregnant daughter and her husband. In one scene the protagonist is confronted with the dilemma of getting involved or not in what appears to be a case of domestic abuse next door,

Rather than deliberately getting involved in neighbors’ problems, woman neighbor, he does not interfere. More bother than it is worth. Until he starts, has a moment. “I will do something about this.” The decision to leave her in danger, is a difficult thing to do [...] He is Jewish, his parents have been

through the Holocaust. Violence perpetuated against parents' generation ... if somebody had opened the door or supported in some way maybe things would have been different. Good people stand by.

Like Long's book group participants, who use character evaluation to question their own values (Long, 2003: 154) the ethical dilemma presented in the story leads Alison to reflect upon her own position. She does this both in terms of her moral stance and the limits to action posed by her psychological and physical vulnerability. The scene, she recalls,

Made me think of a situation I'd been in myself. A neighbor beaten by her boyfriend. There was a lot of time spent reflecting [during and after the event on whether she should have intervened or not]. The book brought that to mind. What did I do then? What would I do now?

As Phelan has noted readers often "come across narratives that do not seem to give sufficient signals for us to make clear and firm discriminations" (2007: 1–2) and this forces reflection. The passage above shows that "the reflexive consciousness" does not speak with just "one voice in the monitoring of action" (Burkitt, 2012 13) and, confronted with alternative scenarios, Alison is not sure how she would behave today. Alison considers her own physical limitations to add that the protagonist's "actions take into account his capability. He can't fight younger men. It felt realistic." Her reflections try to accommodate general or universal principles such as the obligation to help others in need with the constraints posed by her own physical weakness and social status as a woman.

The emotions triggered by the novel—fear, anxiety—as well as her interpretation of the emotions of the protagonist (Holmes, 2010) help her to think through her ethical commitments, evaluate her past behavior and inform her future actions. Change, however, is a constant challenge.

It does occur to me often “why do I find it difficult to learn from experience and then move on?” One needs to fully own an idea to be able to make a change that you want. It’s like switching a switch in your head [...] monstrously challenging to make changes. Like jumping off a cliff.

The hypothetical scenarios and internal dialogue prompted by certain works of fiction offer both an alternative and a step towards such changes in behavior; something like a safe, imaginary rehearsal of what it would be like to be different, to behave differently (Burkitt, 2012). This brings us to a second sense in which books are, in Alison’s case, equipment for living. They offer her tools for social interaction and the improvement of her family relationships.

Alison is active in “BookCrossing,” a social networking site for sharing and tracking books.¹¹ While book crossing mostly involves labelling books and releasing them in public spaces for others to read, label, and share, “bookcrossers” also share online

¹¹ The company is based in Idaho, USA but has members in several countries, including Scotland. According to their website there are “1,570,338 BookCrossers and 11,280,546 books travelling throughout 132 countries” (Bookcrossing n/d).

reviews and meet to swap books and recommend titles to each other. Alison has not written a review in years and mostly makes notes to herself (“one book is bristling like a hedgehog, I put so many little tabs [...] Marked to go back”) but she is active in the release of books and book swapping. Bookcrossing has provided her with social interaction, which she misses from not being at work.

Discussing book plots has also restored her relationship with family members, something mentioned as significant by several other women in this study. Book crossing and reading has brought

myself and my sister together. Cause I am the older sister and I have always felt like we've had to make an effort. I don't understand the way she thinks. We now have topics to discuss together. [It has been] really liberating for us. Strengthened a bond. Very important [...] also thrilled that it was my idea, got her involved in book-crossing.

Discussing books with her sister and other family members has, in her view, eased relationships that used to be strained by her illness and the fact that she is not working. It sometimes allows her to simply avoid the recurring question of “why are you not stacking shelves or something?” Being in a position to recommend books to her sister has not only strengthened her bond with her but also makes Alison feel better about herself after years of depression and its related difficulties with concentration. In her words, reading “offers some kind of validation of the way I think. I feel I am able to understand.” In this case, instead of serving as a barrier between Alison and her family members, which protects her personal time and

emotional resources from their demands (as is the case with some of Radway's (1991) readers), reading serves as a bridge for social relationships.

Alison's books matter to her because she sees them as having facilitated her social relations and contributed to self-understanding and self-validation. Alison's story is also a vivid testimony to the joys that reading can bring. The content of her account and the way she speaks about her reading shows the solace and delight it brings her, even when it includes exposure to difficult or ethically ambiguous situations and increased awareness of personal limitations. Her account of the "meta-experience" of her reading (Warhol, 2003), her attitude towards the affective engagement that the reading produces is very positive and one of the reasons why her reading matters so much to her. Her emotions can be seen as distinct from the "effeminate feelings" described by Warhol (2003) in that they do not lead her to "rehearse and reinforce" her sadness or a disposition to remain isolated, but instead allow her to recover and reengage through the pleasure of understanding others while validating her own capacities.

3. *Frances*

One of the most radical aspects of the experience of reading comes from the ability of the text to remove the reader from their immediate circumstances and thrust them into an infinitely wider world. When readers have understood and loved a text, they have "a world and not just a situation" (Ricoeur, 1973: 94). Understanding a text illuminates a person's situation by enlarging it and turning it into a world.

The case of Frances illustrates the motivation for change that comes from learning about others' lives and the resources for self-understanding and reflexivity that are

obtained in the relationship with fiction. Like other narratives of social and geographical mobility that are not based on life-threatening conditions, such as war or famine, Frances' story begins with the exposure to alternatives.

Frances grew up in the mid-1970s and 80s in a small rural town on the West Coast of the United States that she describes as "backward". She recalls her mother saying that

the real impact of the '60s, didn't really happen where we grew up until the '70s. It took a while [...] to percolate and it didn't come in necessarily the same way.

There weren't loads of hippies around or anything like that, the softening of attitudes took a long time to come.

Some of those attitudes included suspicion of intellectual life. Her mother worked as an English teacher in a local school and raised her and her sister to think of reading differently, as central to personal development and the imagination, and not necessarily as a practical skill that would make them employable. Most of the parents of Frances' high school friends had low paid jobs at the bubble gum and baby food factory that could be seen through her classroom window. When students did not work hard they were threatened by teachers with images of their own future jobs in that factory. Frances went on to university and obtained a PhD in English literature. She moved to Great Britain partly because of her relationship with an English man.

A key element of Frances' identity and the way she leads her life is her frequent and changing reading of a small group of novels that she calls her "little shrine", including *Middlemarch* (Eliot, [1871] 1997) *Fathers and Sons* (Turgenev, [1862] 1975) and *The*

Portrait of a Lady (James, [1881] 1947). These books are life companions (Booth 1988) and possibly a more enduring presence than relatives or lovers. The texts, which she has read “at different stages” in her life and which, in the case of *Middlemarch*, she rereads “almost every year,” have inspired and later helped her to judge and reevaluate her ideas of the good life and her decisions regarding partners, migration, and career choices as circumstances change. These and other books “mean a tremendous amount” to her because “they help it [her life] make sense.” These texts are so central that she keeps two or three copies of the same novel in order to be able to make fresh marginal notes and not influence her rereading.

The first point to make about Frances’ reading is that revisiting her favorite novels supports a constant process of reflexivity (Burkitt, 2012; Holmes, 2010) which leads to self-understanding (Iser, 1972). These novels have helped her both shape and revise her ideals and how these have informed her decisions. Her rereading prompts and helps her make sense of her personal transformation, thus allowing her to narrate and “refigure” (Ricoeur, 1973) herself. In the following passage Frances recalls the plot of *Middlemarch* and how she interpreted it the first time she read it, aged 15, as a good model to follow in her own life: playing the supporting role in an admirable man’s productive life.

One strand of the story is about this woman called Dorothea and the mistake she makes in marriage. It’s because as a young woman—this is nineteenth-century Britain—she perceives herself as not much in herself, but someone that could be of use to others. She models herself on John Milton’s daughters who, when he went blind, they started reading aloud to him and learned Latin and all this sort

of thing. That's what she thinks, she's got to find this guy who is doing some really important work and that will be the great thing about their marriage, this intellectual companionship, because she didn't just want to learn to read Latin, she wanted to use that to become almost in a partnership with this person doing this scholarship [...] I sound ridiculous but I can remember the first time I read it thinking, "yes that would be great, actually!" She marries some hideously old guy, even in the book he's meant to be old, he's in his 50s or something and she's 20. It made perfect sense to me, I thought, "what a good idea!" It turns out badly in the book but I thought, "yes but she did it the wrong way." I thought, this is still really quite a good idea. Then he dies, fortunately for her, and she ends up scandalously marrying a man who is her own age who is much more like her, who is emotional and passionate and interested in doing things in the real world, which is what she wanted to do. I found that less interesting because I thought, "what about the guy who was doing [research]?" It turns out that his academic project was ridiculous but I thought that was just her poor choice. If she'd picked a John Milton that would've been fine.

At 15 Frances could see that Dorothea's first marriage was "a bad idea" because the man was not the right one, but she did not question the legitimacy of the institution of marriage, the role ascribed to women in it, or the social context in which it was practiced. More than 30 years and several relationships and work experiences later, the story is still very relevant and dear to her. However, her reading is quite different. The novel's "inexhaustibility" (Iser, 1972) renders new meanings each time she reads it. She is now more critical of the accessory or instrumental role for women that she had admired in her teens.

And of course now when I read it, having had experiences of different relationships and so on, you just think at the beginning, “oh my God, you poor sad... why do this, how can you not see that that’s a terrible idea!” A lot of it is about bad mistakes that people make when choosing their partner. Another man who is a very intelligent doctor and wants to do research ends up marrying this woman because she’s very beautiful but in fact she’s quite shallow and cold and has no interest in his work and no interest in supporting him to do that. She just wants him to get a fashionable job and support her in the style that she’d like to become accustomed to. And of course I was thinking when I was 15, “that’s the kind of guy! If you have to get married, this is what you would do!”

The crucial element in Frances’ account above is the prescriptive or normative nature of marriage in her worldview at the time, along with the limited opportunities and agency granted to women in her community. Her account of the unfolding shifts in her worldview are revealing of how reflexivity operates in times of social change. In Frances’ town, as she recalls, there was only one acceptable life path for a woman to follow and this included marrying a man, ideally from the community, and having children. Her own mother had come from 50 miles away and her father’s family considered her a “foreigner”:

Where I grew up, most people married somebody they knew, that they’d grown up with. I can remember when we were in first or second grade, it was Valentine’s Day and our teacher saying, “the person you get a Valentine from

today you could be married to in a few years' time" [...] I was looking around even at that age going, "there's no way."

Frances' description of herself at the time suggests she was already questioning the norms of her community around partners and careers. But in spite of the fact that she amused her mother one day by saying that she did not want to have children—"she made me repeat that to my dad because it was so hilarious"—Frances still saw marriage as the only exit strategy, the only way of leaving her town and leading a fulfilling life. As she explains: "I still looked at it as that was part of how you got out, you could never necessarily do this by yourself. To leave the whole world that I'd been born into. It wasn't necessarily something you could do on your own. You needed some guy."

She, nevertheless, did do a lot of it on her own and books played a key role in the process. This leads to the second point that is illustrated by Frances' story. Exposure to fiction and books in general opened her mind to the world beyond her hometown and fueled her imagination and the desire to "get out." Her situation was expanded into a world and illuminated in the process (Ricoeur, 1973). Her mother's legitimization of reading for pleasure and her growing interest in literature meant that she soon learned about difference and about what was "out there":

It was partly books that reinforced what my mother was trying to do with us, to say "here is a bigger life than this, it's not just all about hunting and fishing, marrying somebody that you grew up with," all the rest of it. That there didn't have to be boundaries for you.

Books thrust Frances into a world of endless possibility, where she could find more satisfying models for her life than those on offer in her immediate surroundings. Similarly, one of Long's participants describes how reading Thackeray helped her realize her dream of moving out of Texas in order to encounter the wit displayed by his characters, which she could not find in her hometown of McKinney (Long, 2003: 155). At a time and place when cultural consumption was limited to the printed press and a few channels on TV, as was the case in Frances' hometown, books represented a window into worlds of wonderful complexity and diversity. The interaction between Frances' own dispositions and what was unfamiliar in these texts offered a mirror and a window at the same time. The fictional texts forced her to "reveal aspects of [herself] in order to experience a reality which was different from [her] own" (Iser, 1972: 286).

Finally, a key point to emphasize is that reflexivity and change are not only or even mainly mediated by detached analysis of the content of the texts but by emotional engagement. Frances refused to carry on with her academic career in literature because she loved her books too much. The critical, detached, and suspicious approach predominant in the English department where she was a postgraduate student—a style that is still influential in literary studies (Felski, 2015)—would destroy, she thought, what was most valuable about them. This was their capacity to engage her closely, emotionally. The "little shrine" of her favorite novels has remained a constant and fundamental presence in her life—the place she goes to for solace, self-understanding, and the understanding of others.

V. Conclusions

Reading fiction matters because it offers readers devices to fashion and refigure their subjectivity while caring for themselves and relating to others. On the basis of the accounts of the importance of reading by intensive women readers in the UK, this article has shown that reading fiction is valued and meaningful because it enables self-understanding, ethical reflection, and self-care. It was argued that reading fiction produces enchantment, an experience of intense self-loss, and recognition (Felski, 2008), a revised sense of self (Iser 1972; Ricoeur 1990). Rather than disabling or amounting to escapism, reading enables readers to formulate themselves to themselves and to figure out who they are and what they care about. Separate examples for each dimension (self-understanding, ethical reflection, and self-care) were provided, and in conjunction in the lives of three readers. These illustrations included: the use of the models for life and the language available in fictional texts to determine preferred love relationships; refiguring meaningful life narratives of abuse; empathizing with distant others; shaping awareness about gender inequality; inducing self-validation; and facilitating social interactions with relatives and strangers. It was also shown that because of the somatic implications of enchantment, reading matters for the care of the body. Through a combination of control and indeterminacy, reading fiction is sought out to achieve affective states of relaxation and rest.

A cultural sociology of reading is needed because an examination of readers' attachments and valuations in search of how much or how little they legitimize or critique their social situation, as is done in much of the current research on reading, would deny their agency and ignore the fundamental importance of meaning-making. Fiction reading is used positively in processes of self-understanding and change, the

management of pain, and giving meaning and purpose to relationships and life paths. While reading is often done in contexts that offer a limited number of acceptable or legitimate versions of the good life for women, the very exposure through fictional texts to the plurality of the human condition, its vulnerability and its strengths, opens up for readers the possibility of conceiving and making sense of change in themselves and their situation.

The empirical claims made in this article are limited to the experiences of the narrow group of intensive women readers of fiction who identify strongly with the practice of reading. Further research is needed in order to explore the impact of other forms of reading (of other genres and less intensively) as well as of other media and among other social categories. De Nora (1999; 2000) has reported similar findings for the case of music and its implication as a technology in the “cultural construction of subjectivity” (De Nora, 1999: 54). Exploring the uses of reading fiction among men would give further empirical support to the theoretical claim that reading removes readers from their situation both imaginatively and literally. It would also be necessary to situate the valuations of readers within broader cultural structures that shape the codification of reading as valuable—for example, the normative basis of historical and current campaigns for the promotion of reading. It would also be necessary to explore the impact of the availability of fictional texts, which varies enormously outside the developed world. In order for reading to matter to people, books must be accessible. In spite of its empirical limitations, the approach developed in this article is potentially useful for understanding other experiences of reading as well as for exploring the contribution of other media to people’s self-understanding and orientation. More generally, the kind of reading discussed here may be

paradigmatic of the way people relate to other texts and text-like entities in contemporary societies: taking experientially-based, emotional-cum-ethical positions towards them.

Finally, a necessary complement and next step to the interpretation of the intimate experience of reading fiction offered in this article is the engagement with public life and politics. Further research could explore the links between reading, critical capacity, and political action in contemporary societies. Work by scholars of utopia (Levitas, 1990; 2013), feminist utopian writers (Wagner-Lawlor, 2013) and sociologists interested in fictional accounts of the future, (Tutton, 2016) as well as research on the role of works of popular and classical fiction in furthering the project of the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006) can be brought to bear on the role of reading in the development of subjectivity and reflexivity in the public domain.

Acknowledgments

Part of this research was funded by the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh through its Strategic Research Support Fund. I am grateful to Mary Holmes, Steve Kemp, Jonathan Hearn, Charles Turner, Wendy Griswold, Jeffrey Alexander, and three anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

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